

"OPPRESSION" AS A SOCIO-CRITICAL CATEGORY ----- ELLIOTT #2067

For a long time, the year 1492 has fascinated my mind into a magnet-like attracting to my attention of anything and everything that happened, in any and all fields, that year. The first thing this thinksheet is is simply, then, my internal computer's retrieval and display of the signal "1492" (supplemented by a bit of enriching re-search for the occasion in these two from the reference section of my library: (1) PLOETZ'S (EPITOME OF HISTORY) DICTIONARY OF DATES, which begins "Modern History" with our 1492; and (2) THE TIMETABLES OF HISTORY)....And my second intention in this think-sheet is to set forth some notes on the signal "oppression" as a socio-critical category for historical and contemporary interpretation and rhetoric. Here my objective is cautionary: (1) "Oppression" as interpretation and as rhetoric is two things, not one; (2) "Deliverer of the Oppressed" is not a title exhausting what God is, for the biblical God is also oppressor (eg, dragging the Jews to Babylon); (3) "Oppression" is not just a political category (ie, the powerful overcontrolling the powerless) but also an ecological, and that in two senses: (a) Nature, some places some times, makes human living near to, or completely, impossible (as the locust/drought in the Book of Joel); and (b) Human beings so thrive and despoil, some places some times, as to desertify nature; and (4) "Oppression" is a psychiatric category (usu. called, in individual and societal incidence, "depression") with psychobiological, spiritual, and moral dimensions. I mean to be cautionary against the do-gooder simplism of double caus-ism (combining a pseudocritical single-cause analysis sharply identifying both oppressed and oppressor with what I call, in my #911, a 'passionate egoic formation around some 'cause,' usu. the latest"). Such herdy-trendy-hasty dogoodism predictably does more harm than good in the name and fame of Doing Only Good....But caution against caution: God often turns to the good our good-will-driven-though-mindless strivings!

In my opinion, the pragmatic judgment of history does not favor the insights and actions of the intelligentsia above those whom they call the masses; both, in different ways, are (1) in the dark and (2) perceptive. A divine design against the arrogance of the former and the humiliation of the latter....So who was being "oppressed" in 1492?

1. Well, to being with, Columbus. He couldn't get anybody to stake him for testing his blick--wrong, it turned out--that sailing West was the best way to get to Cathay (Cathay? India? wherever there was boodle). Humans, including human institutions, survive partly by suspecting novelty (and sometimes die, or at least fail, from this suspicion: the dumbest decisions in the foreign-affairs histories of Italy and Portugal were not to stake Columbus). Innovators are "oppressed" by conservatism and philistinism, unimaginativeness, lethargy, and fear. But the very year "Columbus sailed the ocean blue," modern history started (acc. to Ploetz, above): that same year, Spain, by a marriage, became a modern nation (in the sense of establishing its present boundaries): Ferd. of Aragon married Isabella of Castile, and they celebrated the excitement of their new union (sexual and territorial) by taking a flier on a 41-year-old Italian fanatic with a globe in his hand.

2. Who else was oppressed in 1492? A German geographer, Martin Behaim, who was ridiculed for putting geographical knowledge on a ball--as though the world were a globe! Just in time for Columbus' pitch to F. & I. (When you deserve the credit and somebody else gets it, you're oppressed.)

3. Jews. Torquemada, founder of the Spanish Inquisition, gave them 3 months to get out of "Spain" (the new, and present, geographical territory created by the marriage of F. & I.). The central synagogue of Toledo was the pulsing heart of Spanish Jewry; and the main thing I did when in that building in 1966 was to try to create in my soul the tragic and panic feelings of those oppressed and to pray for the creative reconciliation of Judaism and Christianity in our time.

4. Reuchlin, German humanist, criticized for beginning the study of Hebrew and preaching this study as essential to Christian thinking--as in-

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deed it is even though one can make a solid contribution to Christian thinking without knowing Hebrew. The irony of it: The very year the Jews are driven out of Spain, a German thinker begins the modern honoring of Hebrew as a gentile study!

5. Next on our list of oppressees is the Catholic Church (Roman): Alex.VI, history's worst pope, is elevated to the See of Rome. Yes, in 1492. Spiritually and morally corrupt leaders damage human beings as much as do ecopolitical tyrants. Even if you take 1492 as the first "modern" year, we're still in the middle ages, when popes blessed/cursed not just the faithful but all of Europe.

6. In 1492 the Moors, having "had" much of Spain for centuries, felt oppressed by the consequence, to them, of the F. & I. marriage. The Moors were no longer able to survive by playing off Aragon & Castile against each other. Now, instead of two Spains, there was only one; and that one pushed the Moors out of Spain. Odd synchronicity: In the same year, both Jews and Muslims forced out of the new Spain!

7. In 1492, daVinci made history's first sketch of an airplane and was oppressed by public laughter at his insanity for imagining that humans could turn themselves into birds. Says the cynic, no good deed goes without punishment; say I, society punishes innovators & dreamers.

8. And in 1492 the world began to be oppressed (as well as blessed!) by the creation of the first book-publishing house (type-founding + printing + marketing).

While all that human potential was roiling-boiling-actualizing itself in 1492 for good and evil--in government and church, in school and the arts and business--"I wonder what the poor people were doing?" (I put the question in quotes because I so often hear, from a close friend, when he and I are into something impossible for the poor, "I wonder what the poor people are doing?" He means it both as a gentle reminder of the left-out portion of humanity and as a call to be grateful for our openings on life and attentive toward others' needs.)

Well, here's my sketch of what the poor people were doing in 1492 and the soon-ensuing age of early industrialism. What they are doing today--what's happening to them now--is, in most respects, straight-line development from 1492 ("modern history" at its origin) and soon thereafter.

1. As business was being increasingly divorced from life, people were torn from their traditional moorings and exploited by business in addition to their historic exploitation by government. Their traditional oppressor, the feudal lord, was himself exploited by the emergence of the ministate (provincial government) and then by even more inclusive governments--a pattern familiar in the ancient Near & Far East. "The poor of the land" now took on an additional poignant powerlessness.

2. Except for the decreasing option of raids on neighboring ministates, monarchs were dependent for their revenues on the wealth of each their people. Whence the notion that the people must become more prosperous so as to be able to pay heavier taxes. (Analogy from animal husbandry: Selective breeding of cattle so as to produce more milk and meat.) Then came the positive, the promotion of the public welfare for its own sake, ie, for the public's sake (from mere public finance to social economy, in which the poor began to become visible for their own sake).

3. So the natural alliance of government money-getting and business money-making. Agribusiness (the physiocrats) and mercantilism (foreign trade) both needed cheap labor: poverty enforced created the illusion of general prosperity, and the economic engine was "interested" in the de-visibilization of the consequent poor. Prosperity and the poor as enemies!